

**English 378: “Environmental Creative Nonfiction:
Writing Life Overlooked”**

Joni Adamson, Arizona State University, Fall 2014

Course Description: This class is part creative writing workshop and part rhetorical analysis course. Our focus will be on environmental creative nonfiction, but we will pay attention to both craft and rhetorical devices that make an argument persuasive. Each student will write a creative nonfiction essay that will become the key element of her/his final project, which is a digital portfolio, uploaded to the “Humanities for the Environment” (HfE) website: <http://hfe-observatories.org>

From the first day of the course, each student will keep a nature writing journal in which s/he records observations about one species, perhaps one kind of plant, one ordinary insect, one common bird, one microorganism, that can be found on the Tempe campus. Thinking about Henry David Thoreau’s and G. Douglas Atkin’s advice about peripatetic observations and writing, and Gary Paul Nabhan’s methods of “gathering the desert,” students will focus on one “backyard species” (Haupt). Each student will read assigned texts, keep notes in a journal, write creative non-fiction, watch documentary films, take pictures, make drawings, maps, or film short videos to collect the humanities elements of her/his digital (Wordpress) portfolio which will be informed by the scientific information s/he discovers in her/his research about the species chosen as the focus of the portfolio. Through this exercise, we will be thinking about what it might mean to become a “citizen humanist/citizen scientist.” As a class, we will also research as many websites as possible that focus on conserving both endangered and ordinary “backyard” species. Our goal will be to think about “best practices” in the ecological digital humanities that might inform the creation of our own webpages.

Questions that our portfolio project / creative writing essay might answer could include, “Why are so many “backyard” or non-charismatic species “overlooked?” “Why do so many species in urban areas go unnoticed?” “How and why have older understandings of the natural richness of biodiversity and ““bestiaries—compendiums of animal lore and knowledge,’ common in medieval times, been all but lost” (See Lyanda Lynn Haupt, p. 5)? We will be thinking, too, about the kinds and qualities of the relationships that humans have with other species and how our portfolios might contribute to new ways of thinking about human-nonhuman relationships, as what Donna Haraway has called “collected things.”

Required texts and films:

- Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, *Castaways*
- Noel Castree, “Nature,” in *Keywords for Environmental Studies*, Joni Adamson, William Gleason, David Pellow, eds. New York University Press, 2015. 151-156.
- Henry David Thoreau, “Walking”
- Gary Paul Nabhan, *Gathering the Desert*
- Lyanda Lynn Haupt, *The Urban Bestiary: Encountering the Everyday Wild*, Little, Brown and Company, 2013
- Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*, Henry Holt and Co

--“Meet the Coywolf,” PBS, *Nature*, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/coywolf-meet-the-coywolf/8605/>

--“Raccoon Nation,” PBS, *Nature*, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/raccoon-nation-introduction/7518/>

--Daniel Chamovitz, “Do Plants Think?”

<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/do-plants-think-daniel-chamovitz/>

--“Unearthing the Wood-Wide Web - Investigating Fungi: The Wood-Wide Web.” The Open University. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rlOML1hz2XA>

--Alva, Noe, “Do Plants have minds?” (On BB)

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/13.7/2011/12/02/143041917/do-plants-have-minds>

Alison Hawthorne Deming, *Zoologies: On Animals and the Human Spirit*

-- Donna Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin.” *Environmental Humanities*, Vol. 6 (2015): 159-165. www.environmentalhumanities.org

Course Requirements:

--**Class participation and attendance 10%:** Because this class is part literary analysis and part writing workshop, your presence is required. The success of this class depends heavily on your discussion, with the rest of the class, of your readings. Students should prepare for class by reading and analyzing assigned texts and films **before** the class in which they will be discussed.

--**A nature writer's journal:** Your (hardcopy) journal is a place to muse/reflect/philosophize about assigned course readings and write about your observations of one species you find on the ASU campus. Make two to three entries in your journal per week. The journal will be a crucial part of the class--especially as it becomes a place in which to prewrite/brainstorm the creative nonfiction essay that will be central element in your digital portfolio and webpage.

--**Mid-term response/analysis paper:** [length: 6-8 pages] In this rhetorical analysis, you may analyze one specific creative non-fiction writer's work (assigned as part of the required readings), take account of the writer's subject matter or style or technique, analyze the message of the text, and the literary strategies, or craft, of the writings. In other words, how did the writer employ artistic strategies to convey his or her message about human relationship to nonhuman nature? The focus of these essays will be on reading *as writers* as well as scholars and on developing a sense of our own personal aesthetic. Think about how you might use some of the artistic and rhetorical strategies of the author you analyze in your own essay.

--**First draft and final draft of a creative nonfiction essay:** [length: 10 pages] The major project of the semester will be the digital webpage you produce over the course of the semester. The central element of your webpage will be the nonfiction essay you create from many parts and elements that you will first begin drafting/pulling together in your Nature Writing Journal, then transform into a first electronic draft, then transform again into a polished narrative that will be uploaded to your Wordpress webpage.

--**Portfolio Project:** For your portfolio, you will be asked to upload images, drawing, and/or maps that will illustrate your creative nonfiction essay, as well as the “works cited” that you will include on you webpage. The portfolio project assignment is divided into *five* separate elements

that each have separate due dates. Check the schedule below for due dates for each of five tasks: **1)** a scientific description of your chosen species, derived from your initial research in the biological sciences and framed as a narrative; **2)** personal reflections on the life form you have chosen to study (this may include sketches in include in your Nature Writing Journal, photos/video, maps, anecdotes recorded in your Nature Writing Journal, etc.; **3)** an annotated bibliography (or bestiary) of the literary works, art, poetry or films in which your life form has appeared; **4)** collection of copyright-free images of your chosen species which you plan to use in your portfolio and/or on the website. **5)** Each student will report orally on his/her finished portfolio/webpage during the last week of class.

Percentages that will determine your grade:

Participation-----	5%
Nature Writing Journal-----	10%
Mid-term response/analysis paper-----	10%
First and Final drafts of your creative nonfiction essay---	35%
Portfolio Project-----	40%

Schedule

Citizen Science, Citizen Humanities

WEEK 1: Introduction to the Course

*Introduction to the international Humanities for the Environment (HfE) project and website.

<http://hfe-observatories.org>

*Introduction to Life Overlooked classroom site and Wordpress software, <http://hfe-observatories.org/project/life-overlooked/>

*Introduction to Basic Instructions for Adding Content

<http://hfe-observatories.org/resource-library/>

In class, create Log in, Password, and set up your account/webpage on the Life Overlooked site.

WEEK 2: Nature: Migration, Mobility, and Movement

Read: Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, *Castaways*

Read: Noel Castree, "Nature," in *Keywords for Environmental Studies*

Discussion: What is "nature"? What happens when we see things for the first time? How does Cabeza de Vaca's experiences inform our own "looking" at species we may never have seen or noticed on campus before? Is "Nature" static and balanced? Or does it involve processes of movement, migration, and mobility? What is the role, in nature, of humans, who for thousands of years, have been involved in moving animals, seeds, foods, and plants around the globe? What is the role of wind, water and animals in moving seeds, plants, etc. around the world? What "overlooked" campus species will you write about?

Before class, please explore as many websites focus on “life overlooked” as you can discover, including:

Maya Lin’s “What is Missing?” <http://www.whatismissing.net>

Anna Tsing’s “Matsutake Worlds,” <http://www.matsutakeworlds.org>

WEEK 3: Walking the Tempe Campus/Our Urban Lab

Read: Henry David Thoreau, “Walking,” PDF.

Read: G. Douglas Atkins’ “In Other Words: Gardening for Love--The Work of the Essayist,” PDF

We’ll take a short walk around the campus. We’ll spend some time writing in our journals. We’ll discuss the relationship between the journal and your final digital portfolio project narrative and webpage. In our journals, we will also draw maps of the place your species lives on campus. We’ll discuss the relationship between urban species, place and evolution. Can you “gather” or “collect” an urban campus? What is peripatetic observation? Can walking improve writing? How are walking and writing connected or similar?

ASU Edible Campus: <https://cfo.asu.edu/fdm-arboretum-campusharvest?destination=node%2F1938>

ASU Campus Herb Garden: <https://cfo.asu.edu/fdm-arboretum-campusherbgarden>

ASU Sustainability Points of Pride Tour: <https://sustainability.asu.edu/resources/sustainability-initiatives-tour/>

WEEK 4: Walking and Essaying

Read: Gary Paul Nabhan, *Gathering the Desert*

Discussion: What is “nature”? What is “nature writing”? Why write about nature? How does Nabhan define “gathering” the desert? What is peripatetic observation? Can you “gather” or “collect” our campus? Your species?

WEEK 5: The Sixth Extinction

Personal/reflection on your backyard / campus species and why you chose to write about this species due! 1000 words

Read: Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*, 1st half

Discussion: Why are extinction rates accelerating? More discussion of overlooked species on the Tempe Campus.

WEEK 6: Citizen Science / Citizen Humanities

Read: *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*, 2nd half

Read: Jonathan Silvertown, "A New Dawn for Citizen Science," *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* (2009) PDF.

Discussion: What is citizen science? How might we create a "citizen humanities"? How would "citizen humanities" involve gathering, collecting, and curating? How will you gather, collect and curate your webpage?

WEEK 7: Midterm

Mid-term response/analysis paper due.

Workshop: In class work on the digital elements of the project.

Citizen Humanists: The Campus Bestiary and the Creative Environmental Nonfiction Essay

WEEK 8: Animals

Read: *The Urban Bestiary*, 1st half

Annotated bibliography of scientific information about your chosen / backyard species due. (At least 20 sources, annotated for how you will use and cite them on your webpage).

Before class, watch "Meet the Coywolf"

Discussion: How do urban areas shape the evolution of urban species?

WEEK 9: Animals

Scientific description of your chosen life form, derived from initial biological research and your own observations in the "field" (i.e. our campus) due! 1000 words.

Read: *The Urban Bestiary*, 2nd half.

Before class, watch "Raccoon Nation"

Discussion: How do urban areas shape the evolution of urban species?

WEEK 10: The Plant World

Before class, post the first draft of your creative essay to your webpage.

Read: Daniel Chamovitz, "Do Plants Think?"

"Unearthing the Wood-Wide Web - Investigating Fungi: The Wood-Wide Web."

Alva, Noe, "Do Plants have Minds?"

Discussion: Do Plants have Minds?

Collected Things: Finalizing your Webpage

WEEK 11: Collected things, Making Kin

Read Donna Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin.”

Discussion of Haraway’s notion of “collected things” and “making kin.” What would it mean to “make kin” of the species we tend to overlook? How will writing your narrative be like collecting, gathering, and making kin? We will discuss how to transform parts of your nature writing journal, personal reflection, scientific narrative, quotes from your reading, etc. into a creative nonfiction essay.

Workshop: In class work on the narrative elements of your project.

WEEK 12: Polishing your webpage/portfolio, how to pull it all together

Annotated/bibliographic list of the cultural, literary, artistic, poetic, filmic information/stories focusing on your species due!! (This list should be at least 7 double spaced pages long).

Read: Alison Hawthorne Deming, *Zoologies*, 1st half

Discussion: How does Deming’s *Zoologies* provide you with examples for writing your own narrative? How will you weave together your scientific information, your cultural information, your collected lore, and your own experiences? Which of the several sources on your list will you use in your portfolio/project?

WEEK 13: Digital Lab/Visual Image Day

Collection of copyright-free images (and sources and/or permissions) of your chosen species due!

Read: Alison Hawthorne Deming, *Zoologies*, 2nd half

Discussion: How does Deming’s *Zoologies* and all the other nonfiction creative works we have read this semester provide you with examples for writing your own narrative? How will you weave together your scientific information, your cultural information, your collected lore, your own experiences, and the images you have collected? Which of the several images you have collected will you use in your portfolio/project?

Workshop: In class work on the digital/visual elements of your website.

WEEK 14

Student Portfolios: Oral presentations on your webpage

WEEK 15

Student Portfolios: Oral presentations on your webpage